

Legendary Women

By Tom Belton*

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The American Revolution was fought not only by armies. Everyone who lived in the colonies was part of the war for independence. North Carolina's women contributed and suffered much for both sides in the war.

At that time, the population of North Carolina was mostly rural. Men lived with their wives and families on farms. Like women everywhere in those days, the farmers' wives—and all the women in the household—had traditional female roles within the family. A woman's life centered on her family and home. Even the few women who worked away from their own homes for pay performed work expected only of women—cooking, washing clothes, sewing, caring for children and the sick, and tending gardens.

The American Revolution caused big changes in all the colonies. For women, the war created responsibilities and demanded decisions and actions that had been unthought of.

As tensions grew among the colonists about how the British government was treating them, North Carolinians broke up into three groups: the Loyalists, the Patriots, and those who did not take a stand either for or against independence. The last group included the pacifists like the Moravians and Quakers in North Carolina who were **neutral** because of their religious opposition to the war. Each group had women who served and suffered during the Revolution. Here are some of their stories.

The most famous Loyalist was Flora MacDonald. She was known as an heroic woman in Scotland before she ever came to North Carolina. She had saved the life of “Bonnie Prince Charlie”—Charles Stuart, whose grandfather had been king of England and Scotland. Charles had started a rebellion in Scotland in an effort to regain the throne. At the Battle of Culloden in 1746, his army was defeated and he was almost captured by the enemy British soldiers. Flora MacDonald helped him escape.

In 1774 Flora MacDonald and her husband Allan came to North Carolina with their large family. Before they were allowed to come, they had to take an oath, along with all the other Highlanders from Scotland, that they would remain forever loyal to the British crown.

The MacDonald family settled on a plantation called Killiegray in Anson County. In 1776 the royal governor, Josiah Martin, formed an army to fight the revolutionary movement.

Allan MacDonald was made a major in that army. He, a son, and a son-in-law were among the 1,600 North Carolina troops who marched off to the coast to join British troops.

Before the army left, Flora, riding a beautiful white horse, came to the camp to cheer the men on. She called to them to fight bravely and remain loyal to the king. She rode with them during their first day's march and spent the night with them before she went back home.

On February 27, 1776, the Loyalists were soundly defeated by the Patriot militia at Moore's Creek Bridge near Wilmington. Major MacDonald, their son, and son-in-law were taken captive. Courageously, Flora MacDonald visited and comforted the families of others whose men had been killed or captured.

The Revolutionary state government seized Killiegray, and Flora MacDonald was left homeless and nearly penniless. She eventually returned to Scotland, where she was reunited with her husband after a separation of nearly six years. When she died in 1790, nearly 4,000 friends and neighbors came to honor the courageous Scotswoman at her funeral.

Like the MacDonalds, there were many Loyalist families who were driven from their homes in North Carolina and returned to England or Scotland, or moved to British provinces in Canada.

Another Loyalist woman who lost her home and land was Mary Dowd. Mary Dowd was as strong a Loyalist as her husband, Connor Dowd. The wealthy Connor Dowd continued his activities after the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge, organizing a small, mounted army to join British General Cornwallis who was on his way to North Carolina. Although they did not fight with Cornwallis, Dowd's army did fight the Patriots. The Dowds's son was killed, and Connor Dowd fled to the British forces at Wilmington.

The revolutionaries then seized and sold his property in Cumberland County. Dowd went to England in August 1782, leaving his wife and ten children behind on their property in Chatham County. Within three months, the Revolutionary court seized the Dowd property in Chatham County as well. The **General Assembly** passed a special law that permitted Mary Dowd to bring **legal action** in her own name to collect some of the money owed to her husband. At the same time, she was actively trying to arrange for her husband's return. Connor Dowd returned in 1783, and he made a number of trips across the ocean in the years following. For the rest of her life, Mary Dowd saw the steady loss of all the land her husband had owned before the Revolution, land that was seized or sold to satisfy the debts Connor Dowd had made in support of the Loyalist side.

Another woman Loyalist, Elizabeth Cornell Bayard, helped to "make law" in North Carolina. Her father, a wealthy merchant in New Bern, had deeded some property to his daughter. But since he was a Loyalist, his property was seized under states laws that permitted the **confiscation** of property to raise money to fight the Revolution. Some of his property was sold at auction to a man named Spyers Singleton. Elizabeth Bayard brought a

lawsuit in the state court to get the property back from Singleton. The state supreme court decided in 1787 that the laws under which the property had been seized were not allowed by the state constitution of 1776. The case of *Bayard v. Singleton* helped to establish the right of the courts to consider whether an act of the legislature was permitted by a constitution.

There were many heroic Patriot women in North Carolina during the Revolution. One North Carolinian led what has been called the “earliest known . . . political activity on the part of women” in America. A few months after the Boston Tea Party, a group of fifty-one women in Edenton signed a public proclamation that they would not drink any tea or wear clothes made from British cloth. The first reaction was to **ridicule** their action. A London newspaper published a **caricature** of the Edenton Tea Party. James Iredell, later a justice of the United States Supreme Court, received a letter from his brother Arthur in London asking a **sarcastic** question: “Is there a female Congress in Edenton too?” But this public call for women to support the Revolution had an effect. The message was heard. Women brought out their unused spinning wheels and looms and made their own cloth instead of buying British-made goods. Women collectively declared their independence from English imports.

Margaret Sharpe was born in England but came to North Carolina and married a respected physician, Alexander Gaston of New Bern. She and her husband were ardent Patriots and bitter enemies of the Loyalists. Alexander Gaston served as a member of the **Committee of Safety** and as captain of a Patriot volunteer company. In August 1781 a troop of Loyalists raided New Bern. They cruelly and vengefully killed Dr. Gaston as his wife knelt, begging them to spare his life. Aiming the muskets over her shoulder, the Loyalists shot him through the heart, then threatened that “the rebel should not have even the rest of the grave.” Margaret Gaston protected his body with hers until they rode away and she could give him proper burial.

The courageous woman stayed on in her adopted home, raised their children alone, and wore the black of mourning for her husband the rest of her life. Because of her courage and suffering, the people of New Bern honored her as a Patriot of the Revolution.

Betsy Dowdy, Mary Slocumb, and Elizabeth Maxwell Steele are also central figures in North Carolina **legends** about the Revolutionary War. Their stories follow.

In the winter of 1775, Virginia’s royal governor, Lord Dunmore, was preparing an attack on the Albemarle Sound region in North Carolina. He wanted to seize the many fine horses in the area for his own soldiers. The only Revolutionary soldiers in the area strong enough to stop the assault were commanded by General William Skinner in Perquimans County. When sixteen-year-old Betsy Dowdy heard of Lord Dunmore’s plans, she rode her pony “Black Bess” through the cold December night to General Skinner’s headquarters with the information. Skinner immediately sent his troops to meet Lord Dunmore’s army. The Patriots defeated the British troops at the Battle of Great Bridge. The story of the fifty-one-mile ride of Betsy Dowdy and how she saved the horses is an endearing legend among North Carolina storytellers.

The next legend is about the Mary Slocumb at the Battle of Moore’s Creek Bridge. One day in February 1776, she watched her husband Ezekiel ride off with a Patriot army toward certain battle.

The next night she dreamed she saw “a body wrapped in my husband’s guard-cloak—bloody—dead.” She left her bed, mounted her horse, and rode all night. When daylight came, she had ridden more than thirty miles and had arrived at Moore’s Creek where she heard the thunder of cannon.

Riding blindly toward the sound of firing, she came to a cluster of trees where about twenty wounded men were lying. One body was wrapped in her husband’s cloak. She uncovered the head and saw a face “clothed with gore from a dreadful wound across the temple.” The bloody face was warm and “an *unknown voice* begged for water.” She brought the man some water, washed his face, and discovered it was not her husband! She cleaned and dressed the man’s terrible wounds, then stayed for hours moving among the other wounded nursing them. Then Mary described: “I looked up, and my husband, as bloody as a butcher . . . stood before me.” He had been in a company that had chased the enemy troops across the creek and helped the Patriots win the battle. Knowing her husband was alive, she continued caring for the wounded, and in the middle of the next night she mounted her horse and again rode alone through the night to reach her home and baby.

The North Carolina Museum of History has a **gourd** that legend says was used by Mary Slocumb to give water to the wounded when she nursed them through the night at Moore’s Creek Bridge. At the battle site is a statue that honors Mary Slocumb and the other women who bravely helped in the Revolutionary War.

Another legend tells the story of Elizabeth Maxwell Steele. It happened after the Battle of Cowpens. Patriot General Nathanael Greene was in North Carolina, trying to unite his army to attack and defeat the British General Cornwallis’s army. General Greene had ridden alone toward Salisbury and arrived at an inn late at night, rain-soaked, dirty, and exhausted. A Patriot doctor met him at the door and expressed his concern. The general replied: “Yes—fatigued—hungry—alone, and penniless!”

The innkeeper, Elizabeth Maxwell Steele, overheard his comment. She laid a meal before him, then carefully closed the door and told him she had overheard his words as he came in. She drew two bags full of money from under her apron, perhaps her earnings of years, and said to the general: “Take these, for you will want them, and I can do without them.” He was so grateful for the Patriot’s support for the fight for independence that he took a portrait of King George III from the wall and wrote on the back of it: “O, George, hide thy face and mourn.” Then he replaced it with the face to the wall. Greene went on to the battle against Cornwallis at Guilford Courthouse.

The flag identified with the Battle of Guilford Courthouse is the oldest in the North Carolina Museum of History’s collection. According to legend, it was made by the women of Guilford County and carried by Patriot troops during the battle.

Religious pacifists were not protected by their neutrality in the war. Both the Loyalists and the Patriots frequently seized food and livestock from the Quaker and Moravian families. Pacifists were also heavily taxed to raise money for military supplies. In spite of the way the pacifists were treated, the women got swept up in the war. For example, after the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, Quaker women volunteered to nurse the wounded of both sides.

However, one Quaker, Hannah Blair, felt sympathy for the Patriot cause. She secretly helped those soldiers as much as she could without going against her religion. She provided food and medicine, hid the soldiers when necessary, carried secret messages, and mended uniforms. When the Loyalists found out, they burned her farm. After the war, the new government gave her formal thanks and a small pension for her wartime services.

The sufferings and the contributions of women to the war for independence are not well-known. Many records were not made during the revolutionary period, and those that we do have deal with military heroes and battles. Women made major contributions to the war effort with their struggle to maintain their homes and families.

Most North Carolinians lived on small farms where they produced almost all of their basic needs. With husbands and sons away fighting, working the farms and making important decisions on their own fell to the women for the first time. Along with this challenge was the danger of the armies seizing or destroying family crops and livestock which could mean starvation. This was especially true toward the end of the war when much of the military activity took place in the southern states.

Women stepped forward and met these challenges successfully. At the same time, many of them supported the cause of their beliefs through their political stands and by helping during military actions. The traditional role of women was expanded and changed by the demands and opportunities presented by war.

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Definitions

Rural means "country" as opposed to *urban* meaning "city."

To be **neutral** is not to be on one side or the other in a conflict.

A **General Assembly** is the law-making body of a colony or state.

Legal action is a case in a court of law brought by one party against another in order to obtain justice.

Confiscation is taking possession of property by legal authority.

To **ridicule** is to laugh at or make fun of.

A **caricature** is a picture or cartoon exaggerating the peculiarities of a person or persons.

Sarcastic describes a type of remark which is sneering or hurtful.

A **committee of safety** was a local committee that maintained contact with committees of safety in other towns and counties for the purpose of defense against the British and loyalist war effort.

Legends are stories from the past that may or may not be true but often are based on some fact.

A **gourd** is a drinking vessel made from the hollowed-out dried shell of certain fruits.